

An Overview of China's Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative: Silk Road and Infrastructure Narratives

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Chinese infrastructure investments internationally have steadily grown under the umbrella of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Introduced in 2013, the BRI is an elaborate global infrastructure development and economic strategy for a 'brighter future'. With the BRI, China seeks to establish a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

The perception of China and BRI investments is tightly connected to the infrastructure projects themselves. Nevertheless, Beijing takes an active approach to formulate positive narratives about the BRI using its state media. In *China's Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative: Silk Road and Infrastructure Narratives*, Carolijn van Noort analyses these narratives and explores Beijing's international communication of the BRI in the digital sphere.

The book contends that China's communication of the BRI consists of tailored infrastructure and Silk Road narratives. The communication of these 'strategic narratives' has two objectives. Firstly, China communicates infrastructure narratives to promote its image as infrastructure and standards-setting power. Secondly, Silk Road narratives serve a different purpose: to conjure up a historical continuation of friendly and cooperative relations and forge China's identity as a good neighbour, good friend, and good partner. These infrastructure and Silk Road narratives have an aesthetic function because they beautify projects that could otherwise be seen as mundane or boring. However, China's communication conceals controversies and criticisms that may complicate or undermine a positive message. As a result, these aesthetically pleasing productions are over-pristine and might fail to persuade target audiences.

In the book, van Noort conceptualises infrastructure narratives through a composition of spatial, temporal, political, economic, technological, and perceptual modalities. In a general context, states focus on the positive aspects of these modalities to create a persuasive infrastructure narrative. In the case of China's communication, each of these modalities are identified: Spatially, China associates the BRI with regional connectivity and economic corridors. Temporally, China emphasizes that its infrastructure projects reduce time travel and are fast and reliable. Politically, China is represented as a genuine partner, and its infrastructures are explained as being inclusive and demand-driven. Moreover, China uses the

economic modality to advance a promise of increased trade and logistical capacity. The technological modality is used to associate Chinese infrastructure with high standards and innovative practices. Lastly, the perceptual modality is encountered when China emphasizes positive user experiences, including convenience and affordability. Not surprisingly, China's infrastructure narratives only emphasize positive qualities, behaviours, and actions.

Compared to the infrastructure narratives, Silk Road narratives consist of selective representations of the past. China conjures up nostalgia for the Silk Road by referencing specific travellers, landscapes, and goods and ideas that were exchanged along the land-based and maritime Silk Roads. Specifically, this involves representations of the Han, Tang, and early Ming dynasties, people like Zhang Qian, Gan Ying, Xuanzang, Marco Polo, and Zheng He; images of caravans, Zheng He's Treasure Fleet, and geographical maps, and mentions of silk, porcelain, pearls, spices, and Buddhism, among other references. In doing so, China historicizes its relations with BRI partners using positive stories and images. Beijing tailors its communication towards specific countries using Silk Road-specific histories. Moreover, these Silk Road narratives are linked to a broader tradition of Chinese civilization. For example, Beijing promotes Confucian values and artistic charm, contributing to a great Chinese culture narrative.

The book moves beyond arguments that China's international communication is propaganda/spin/misinformation. Instead, it describes in detail how China tries to create a shared meaning of BRI projects and bilateral relations. The book explores visual material disseminated by China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua News Agency on social media channels. Using a multiple case study approach, the book comprises studies of the Second Belt and Road Forum held in 2019, the Alternative North-South Road in Kyrgyzstan, the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, and the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. These BRI projects vary in terms of their financing scheme (grants/loans), reputation, and capital. Even so, the author observes the communication of tailored infrastructure and Silk Road narratives.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, China's infrastructure narrative appeals to the country's desire for transport independence. China-Kyrgyzstan relations are historicized using selective representations from the Han and Tang dynasties (overland Silk Road). To Kenya, the Standard Gauge Railway holds the promise of more cargo trains locally and regionally. Voyages of Zheng He to the coast of Kenya and a shared memory of colonial oppression and independence fights are used to stabilize China-Kenya relations. According to China's communication, the Friendship Bridge in the Maldives is also a 'bridge of dreams' and a 'bridge of convenience'. Representations of Zheng He's expeditions to the Maldives contribute to the idea that friendly China-Maldives relations are a continuation of the past. Unsurprisingly, China's communication on each of these BRI projects ignores counterarguments including land-grabbing concerns, Sinophobia, and unsuccessful Chinese projects.

Noticeably, the book focuses on how China wants to be seen internationally beyond Western media bias. Beijing directs significant resources to improve the persuasiveness of China's narratives, including through training and exchange programs of foreign journalists and international media collaborations. Nevertheless, Beijing cannot control the media environment beyond its borders, thus becoming vulnerable to counter-narratives and different journalism expectations. Using Silk Road nostalgia in their foreign policy discourse is another way to anchor bilateral relations, as it builds on positive connotations, including people

mobility, connectivity, and trade. However, the circulation of the Silk Road trope in global politics may lack appeal, with Beijing projecting a Sino-centric view of the past that smooths over any problematic episodes.

Analysing China's infrastructure communication provides important insights into the aims and principles of the BRI. Aside from building bridges, roads, railways and ports, Beijing is cultivating a new type of international relations based on inclusivity, equality, prosperity, and peace. Many countries are receptive to this message and are buying into the BRI. However, as the Kyrgyzstan, Kenya, and the Maldives case studies show, there remains significant opposition to Chinese investors and migrants. Considering Xi Jinping's commitment to increase China's soft power, *China's Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative: Silk Road and Infrastructure Narratives* sheds light on how the country seeks to charm foreign audiences.

As a final point, infrastructure projects remain a significant topic in global politics in the foreseeable future, as a substantial gap in international infrastructure investments is evident. The US and its G7 partners and the European Union have started developing their own infrastructure initiatives in response to China's successful rollout of the BRI. This fuels a competition between different development and economic partners as much as it boosts a narrative battle in the digital sphere to communicate the most persuasive infrastructure narrative.